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UNIVERSALIZING MORALS,
DEPERSONALIZING MAN:
KANT'S MORAL EDUCATION
OF THE SUBJECT



THE LECTURE IS POSTED ON MOODLE IN ITS ENTIRETY AS POWER-POINT PRESENTATION

Immanuel Kant. Kant lived in the Prussian city Königsberg his entire life. He never traveled, and is famous for his methodic and rigorous lifestyle. After work, Kant would have his famous afternoon walk, being so punctual about this exercise that the German writer Heinrich Heine once quipped that the wives of Königsberg adjusted their clocks after him passing by. This methodic, monotonous, and rigorous life might indicate a rather dry personality, but apparently he was not. Anecdote has it that Kant was an entertaining, engaging, and witty conversationalist. He seems to have been popular as a guest in the better society, as well as popular with his students, and seems to have had a good sense of humor.

Kant's Regulatory Idea. When one studies metaphysics of moral, one sets out to determine the general and universal principles that guide moral action, whether or not people actually follow these principles. Kant says: "even if there has never existed a sincere friend, sincerity in friendship is an ideal still required of every man." So, even if the motives for our actions are impure and selfish, Kant's moral theory prevails, because it deals with what *ought to be* the case. Moral law does not depend on experience, but on reason. Moral principles must be grounded in pure *a priori* concepts, not mixed with anything empirical.

A Free will to Obey Principles and Idealties. The reason why we so often do not follow ideal regulatory principles, which we ought to follow, is that we as humans have a free will. If we were objects, we would not have a choice. A stone cannot decide whether or not it wants to follow the laws of nature, but as subjects we can choose not to follow the laws of morals. Because of our freedom of the will, the metaphysical ethical laws Kant deduces, as applying specifically to human beings, are not *laws of nature*, but *laws of freedom*.

Kant "Deduces" a Moral Principle Implicitly Known, the "Good Will" being the First Step in such a 'Deduction'. That a moral imperative is *a priori* implies that it applies to all peoples in all histories, and under all circumstances, whether or not they live by it and obey it. It is *a priori* because it is already part of our rational constitution. Kant therefore only "deduces" (i.e., articulates and makes explicit) what is already there as implicitly known. Universal moral law is part of our implicit rational knowledge, which we as such 'know' is true as rational beings. Kant starts his deduction by asserting as law that, "There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will." (*Grounding*,

p. 7). Kant continues that a good will is good not because it achieves some end, or has some personal benefit or profit, but because it is “good in itself”: “A good will is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i.e., it is good in itself.” [. . .] “[The will] is not merely good as a means to some further end, but is good in itself.” (*Grounding*, p. 7 & 9).



It is Reason, not Emotion that Executes the Moral Principle. The ‘good will’ is not defined as having ‘good intentions,’ because such a definition would be redundant and meaningless – it is the same thing. Kant wants to deduce universal moral principles, and if a ‘good will’ simply were to have ‘good intentions,’ he would still need to explain what is inherent in exhibiting ‘good intentions.’ Furthermore, if a ‘good will’ were reducible to ‘good intentions,’ we would be referring to a psychologically determined ‘good will’ rooted in a compassionate subject. But the moral principle cannot be determined from either individual psychology, nor from compassion. The moral principle is formal and universal, never concrete and individual; and it is rooted in reason, never passions.

The ‘good will’ is, a) an act performed from duty, b) it is free of self-interest, and c) it obeys a maxim prescribed by Law. What is it to ‘act from duty’? – It is, 1) to act, not only according to a law, but for the sake of a law that transcends the individual. 2) It is to act contrary to inclinations (desires, self-interests, personal benefits, profit, etc.). 3) It is to adopt an action because reason commands of us this course of action (not because passions or compassions urge us on). What is a maxim? – A maxim is a brief articulation of an instruction that the individual follows in his action. What is Law? – Law is the set of imperatives prescribing moral actions. Moral Laws are always categorical, meaning that they are not up for discussion or negotiation. If the Ten Commandments are divine rules of conduct, Kant’s categorical imperatives are rational rules of conduct.

Respect for Law, Ladies and Gentlemen, Respect . . . Only actions done *from duty* have moral content, because they are done *for the sake of* duty, without considerations of inclinations or personal benefits. They are done out of nothing but pure *respect for Law*. “Duty is the necessity of an action done out of respect for the law. [. . .] The pre-eminent good which is called moral can consist in nothing but the representation of the law in itself.” (*Grounding*, p. 12-13).

The Categorical Imperative, 1 Kant’s *categorical imperative* in its first formulation reads: “Since I have deprived the will of every impulse that might arise for it from obeying any particular law, there is nothing left to serve the will as principle except the universal conformity of its actions to law as such, i.e., I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.” (*Grounding*, p. 14). Example: “If I am in distress, may I make a promise with the intention of not keeping it.” In other words, is it okay under some circumstances to lie? – Now, one might argue that a person might avoid lying, because it gets back at him and hurts him in the long run. This reasoning presupposes that one should be truthful because it has beneficial consequences. The reasoning presupposes a so-called *hypothetical imperative*, an if-then relation. However, a *hypothetical imperative* is not ‘categorical’; it is not unconditional, universal, and absolute. A *categorical imperative* is asserted out of respect for Law, without other concerns. A *hypothetical imperative* is asserted out of concerns for benefits or profits. Observing

the *categorical imperative*, I avoid lying because of *respect for universal Law*. My reason tells me that lying cannot be accepted as universal Law; it tells me that if I will lying as universal Law, then I will everybody to lie, and then it is no longer possible to make promises at all. Under the obligation of a universal law to lie, every promise is a contradiction in terms. "I immediately become aware that I can indeed will the lie but can not at all will a universal law to lie. For by such a law there would really be no promises at all, since in vain would my willing future actions be professed to other people who would not believe what I professed, or if they over-hastily did believe, then they would pay me back in like coin." (*Grounding*, p. 15).

The Categorical Imperative, 2 We can only rationally choose moral imperatives, because our wills in themselves are not moral, rational, or objective. We are not gods, and we have no holy wills, we have only human wills. If we were gods, we would not need moral imperatives. In the categorical imperative, the maxim of the action conforms to universal law. This conformity is alone what is necessary by the imperative; therefore there is only one imperative and it reads: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. [. . .] Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature." (*Grounding*, p. 30)

Human Autonomy as Moral Imperative If I tell a lie, I presuppose that we have a universal moral obligation to tell the truth, because I calculate and expect that the one I lie to believes I tell the truth. I tell the lie believing in universal law, I just don't apply this universal law to myself. In that case, I am using my fellow human being as a means to further my personal ends. This cannot be permitted, because in all cases where I use another rational being for my own ends, the maxim, 'I shall use another rational being in order to further my own end,' cannot become a "universal law of nature," because we then place ourselves under a universal obligation to deprive ourselves of our rationality – and again, that is absurd. A rational being is characterized by its ability to make choices; if I deprive a person of this ability, I deprive him of the "freedom of his will." The categorical imperative therefore has another famous formulation, namely that one must always use another rational being as *an end in himself*, never as a means: "Rational nature exists as an end in itself." [. . .] "Persons must exist as ends in themselves."

The Kingdom of Ends: Kant as the First Human Rights Philosopher. In his 'deductions' of the moral imperatives, Kant presupposes that Man is capable of self-legislation – that is, we are able to give laws to ourselves, which we are able thereupon to follow. We are not subjected to natural laws (in which case we are without choice in moral matters), but to 'practical laws of freedom.' This freedom from natural laws in the human being must be preserved. If therefore 'practical laws' are fashioned as 'natural laws,' it indicates a perversion of reason, and a violation of human freedom. If a dictator dictates laws as if they were laws of nature, his maxim cannot be universalized, because it contradicts human freedom as such. Because of the fundamental autonomy, humans must never be deprived of their freedom to make rational decisions. They must always be treated as ends, and we must legislate as if we all belonged to a "Kingdom of Ends," a society where we are free and have equal rights.



Calvin and Hobbes

BY WATKINSON



GET WHAT YOU CAN WHILE THE GETTING'S GOOD - THAT'S WHAT I SAY! MIGHT MAKES RIGHT! THE WINNERS WRITE THE HISTORY BOOKS!

